

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks at the AFL–CIO National Convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
September 15, 2009

The President. Thank you. Thank you, AFL–CIO. Thank you. Thank you very much. Please, everybody, have a seat. Thank you. Thank you, guys. Thank you very much, everybody. All right, you guys are making me blush. Thank you.

Audience members. Obama! Obama! Obama!

The President. Thank you so much, everybody. You know, I tell you what, the White House is pretty nice, but there's nothing like being back in the House of Labor. Let me begin by recognizing a man who came to Washington to fight for the working men and women of Pennsylvania and who has a distinguished record of doing just that, Arlen Specter.

I want to give my thanks and the thanks of our Nation to one of the great labor leaders of our time, a man whose entire life has been devoted to working people, who brought new life to a movement, and who worked tirelessly on behalf of organized workers, and who will be stepping down tomorrow, your president, John Sweeney. John, I know that Maureen is looking forward to seeing a little more of you, and your granddaughter Kennedy is about to get a whole lot more spoiled by her grandpa. But we are so proud of the work that you've done and grateful for your lifetime of service.

I know it's bad luck to congratulate somebody before they're officially elected, but I'm going to go ahead and take my chances and congratulate the man who will pick up John's mantle, the son and grandson of Pennsylvania coal miners, a man who worked his way through college to lead the United Mine Workers, my friend, a fiery advocate for America's ideals, Rich Trumka. I also want to congratulate the officers coming in with Rich: Arlene, who will be continuing her service; and Liz, who will be making history as the first woman elected secretary-treasurer. I am looking forward to working with every single one of you.

Now, being here with all of you is a reminder of what we're trying to do in Washington and why I'm there in the first place, because one of the fundamental reasons I ran for President was to stand up for hard-working families, to ease the struggles, to lift the hopes, and make possible the dreams of middle class Americans.

Your stories are what drive me each and every day in the White House. Stories I read about in letters, or I hear about in town hall meetings, or somebody grabs me in a rope line and starts telling me something, stories I remember from the campaign trail. Stories like one told by Steve Skvara, a proud member of the United Steelworkers in Indiana. Steve spent 34 years at LTV Steel, until a car accident left him with a disability and forced him to retire. When the company went broke a couple years later, Steve lost his pension, and his family lost their health care.

So rising to ask a question at the CFL—the AFL–CIO debate during the campaign, Steve said—and I'm quoting him now—"Every day of my life, I sit at the kitchen table across from the woman who devoted 36 years of her life to my family, and I can't afford to pay for her health care." And as he said it, he got choked up, and his voice started to crack.

Brothers and sisters, this isn't just about Steve; this is about all of us. Because when hard-working Americans like Steve succeed, that's when organized labor succeeds. And when

organized labor succeeds, that's when our middle class succeeds. And when our middle class succeeds, that's when the United States of America succeeds. That's what we're fighting for.

For over half a century, the success of America has been built on the success of our middle class. It was the creation of the middle class that lifted this Nation up in the wake of a Great Depression. It was the expansion of the middle class that opened the doors of opportunity to millions more. It was a strong middle class that powered American industries and propelled America's economy and made the 20th century the American century.

And the fundamental test of this century, of our time, is whether we will heed this lesson: whether we will let America become a nation of the very rich and the very poor, of the haves and the have-nots, or whether we will remain true to the promise of this country and build a future where the success of all of us is built on the success of each of us.

That's the future I want to build. That's the future the AFL–CIO wants to build. That's the future the American people want to build. That's the future that I've been working to build from the moment I took office.

Now, we've been hearing a lot of stuff from folks who aren't that friendly to me—*[laughter]*—or the union movement. So let's just take a stroll down memory lane. *[Laughter]* See, so let's just remember where we were when I took the oath of office a little over 8 months ago.

At the time, folks were fearing the complete collapse of our entire financial system. Our economy was shedding about 700,000 jobs a month. Our credit markets were frozen; folks couldn't get a home loan, they couldn't get a car loan, they couldn't get a student loan if they needed it. What was a deep recession threatened to become a great depression. You remember that, right?

Audience members. Yes!

The President. Okay. That's why we acted boldly and swiftly to pass an unprecedented economic Recovery Act. A plan that didn't include any of the usual Washington earmarks or porkbarrel spending, but what it did include was a guarantee to uphold Davis-Bacon and pay prevailing wage.

Because of the Recovery Act, we're keeping a promise I made to give all of you—95 percent of working Americans—a tax cut, a tax cut that will benefit nearly 5 million families in Pennsylvania. We increased and extended unemployment insurance to 12 million Americans, including hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians. We made sure that they could get health insurance if they were looking for a job, because COBRA was too expensive, reduced the cost of it by 65 percent. So a lot of families out there were able to hang onto their health care even during the downturn.

We're putting Americans to work across this country rebuilding crumbling roads and bridges and waterways with the largest investment in our infrastructure since Eisenhower created the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s. All in all, many middle class families will see their incomes go up by about \$3,000 because of the Recovery Act, helping them get back much of what they've lost due to this recession.

So I know times are still tough for working people. I know too many people are still looking for work or worried they'll be the next ones let go. But the Recovery Act is making a difference. We've stopped our economic freefall. That's something everybody can agree on.

But here's the problem: Even before this last financial crisis, the economy had problems. Just last week, a census report came out showing that in 2008, before the downturn, family income fell to its lowest point in over a decade, and more families slid into poverty. Folks at the top 1 percent did pretty good. Everybody else saw their wages and incomes flatten. That's unacceptable. And I refuse to let America go back to the culture of irresponsibility and greed that made it possible, back to an economy with soaring CEO salaries and shrinking middle class incomes, back to the days when banks made reckless decisions that hurt Wall Street and Main Street alike. We're not going to go back to those days. It'd be bad for unions, bad for the middle class, and bad for the United States of America. We're not turning back; we're moving forward.

We're not turning back; we're moving forward. And that's why we need to build a new foundation for lasting prosperity by creating the jobs of the future, by reforming our health care system, by laying down tough rules of the road to protect consumers from abuse, let the markets function fairly and freely, and ensure that we never experience another crisis like this again. That's how we'll build an economy that works for working Americans. That's how we'll help our children climb higher than we did. That's how we'll grow our great American middle class.

Audience member. I love you!

The President. I love you too, sister. [*Laughter*] We'll—although, it sounds like you've been hollering too much; your throat was all—[*laughter*].

We're going to grow our middle class with policies that benefit you, the American worker. And as John Sweeney noted, I've set up a Middle Class Task Force to do just that, run by my outstanding Vice President, that scrappy kid from Scranton, Pennsylvania, Joe Biden.

We'll grow our middle class by building a stronger labor movement. That's why I named Hilda Solis, daughter of a union member, as our new Labor Secretary. Hilda and I know that whether we're in economic times—good economic times or bad economic times, labor is not the problem, labor is part of the solution.

That's why we've begun reversing and replacing old antilabor Executive orders and policies with ones that protect your benefits and protect your safety and protect your rights to organize and collectively bargain. That's why the very first bill I signed into law was the Lilly Ledbetter Act to uphold the basic principle of equal pay for equal work. That's why I stand behind the "Employee Free Choice Act," because if a majority of workers want a union, they should get a union.

We'll grow our middle class by creating jobs for Americans who want one, not just any jobs, but jobs with good wages and good benefits, jobs that give a person the satisfaction of knowing they'll meet their responsibilities to their families, jobs that aren't just a source of income, but a source of pride and self-respect. Every American deserves that much.

Earlier today I visited a GM plant in Youngstown, Ohio, that is—[*applause*]*—*Youngstown in the house. This plant is rehiring about a thousand workers to make the cars of tomorrow. That's a sign of life in our auto industry, and I'm pleased to see it. But you know what? I don't want to just see jobs returning to our auto industry; I want to see them being created across this country in every industry. That's why we're investing in a clean energy economy that will free America from the grip of foreign oil and create millions of new green jobs that can't be outsourced. That's why I've named a new point person to jumpstart American manufacturing so that we can make "Made in America" not just a slogan, we want to make it a reality.

We'll grow our middle class by doing a better job educating our sons and daughters. It was the GI bill that helped strengthen the middle class in the 20th century, and our generation deserves the same kind of commitment. And that's why we've begun improving standards and holding ourselves more accountable and making college and advanced training more affordable and offering students a complete and competitive education, from the cradle to the classroom, from college through a career. That's how we'll prepare every child in America, not just some children, but every child in America to outcompete any worker in the world.

And, yes, we'll grow our middle class by finally providing quality, affordable health insurance in this country. Health care can't wait. It can't wait. Few have fought for this cause harder, few have championed it longer than you, our brothers and sisters in organized labor. You're making phone calls, knocking on doors, showing up at rallies, because you know why this is so important. You know this isn't just about the millions of Americans who don't have health insurance; it's about the hundreds of millions more who do: Americans who worry that they'll lose their insurance if they lose their job, who fear their coverage will be denied because of a preexisting condition, who know that one accident or illness could mean financial ruin.

In fact, a new report from the Kaiser Family Foundation was released today showing that family premiums rose more than 130 percent over the last 10 years, three times faster than wages. They now average over \$13,000 a year, the highest amount on record, which is why when you go in to negotiate, you can't even think about negotiating for a salary—a wage increase because the whole negotiation is about trying to keep the benefits you already have.

That's not just the fault of the employer; it's the fault of a broken health care system that's sucking up all the money. When are we going to stop it? When are we going to say enough is enough? How many more workers have to lose their coverage? How many more families have to go into the red for a sick loved one? How much longer are we going to have to wait? It can't wait.

Audience members. We can't wait! We can't wait! We can't wait!

The President. We can't wait. My friends, we have talked this issue to death, year after year, decade after decade. That's why I said last week before a joint session of Congress, I said, the time for bickering is over. The time for games has passed. Now is the time for action. Now is the time to deliver on health insurance reform.

The plan I announced will offer more security and more stability to Americans who have insurance. It will offer insurance to Americans who don't. And it will slow the growth of health care costs for our families, our businesses, and our Government.

If you already have health insurance through your job—and because many of you are members of unions, you do—nothing in this plan will require you or your employer to change your coverage or your doctor. Let me repeat: Nothing in this plan will require you to change your coverage or your doctor.

What this plan will do is make your insurance work better for you. It'll be against the law for insurance companies to deny you coverage because of a preexisting condition. It will be against the law for insurance companies to drop your coverage when you get sick or water it down when you need it the most. They won't be able to place some arbitrary cap on how much coverage you can receive in a given year or a given lifetime. We'll place a limit on how much you can be charged for out-of-pocket expenses, because in the United States of America, nobody should go broke just because they got sick.

Insurance companies will be required to cover, at no extra charge, routine checkups and preventive care, like mammograms and colonoscopies, because there's no reason we shouldn't be catching diseases like breast cancer or colon cancer before they get worse. It makes sense, it saves money, and it will save lives.

So that's what we're offering to people who already have health insurance: more stability and security. For the tens of millions of Americans who don't have health insurance, the second part of this plan will finally offer them—offer you—affordable choices. We'll do this with a new insurance exchange, a marketplace where individuals and small businesses, they can shop for affordable health insurance plans that work for them.

And because there will be one big group, these uninsured Americans, they have leverage, and they can drive down the cost of care and get a better deal than they're getting right now. That's how large companies and Government employees get affordable insurance. It's how everybody in Congress—including those who are always critical of Government—get their insurance. It's time to give every opportunity to Americans that Members of Congress give to themselves.

I've also said that one of the options in this exchange should be a public option. Now let me be clear. Let me be clear, because there's been a lot of misinformation out here about this. This would just be an option. Nobody would be forced to choose it. No one with insurance would be affected. But what it would do is offer Americans more choices and promote real competition and put pressure on private insurers to make their policies affordable and treat their customers better.

Now, when you're talking with some of your friends and neighbors, they might say, "Well, that all sounds pretty good, but how are you going to pay for it?" And that's a legitimate question, because I inherited the \$1.3 trillion deficit when I came into office. That's the other thing people have been a little selective about; they don't seem to remember how we got into this mess. *[Laughter]* But it's a legitimate question: How are we going to dig ourselves out of this big financial hole we're in? So let me try and answer it.

The plan I'm proposing is going to cost \$900 billion over 10 years. That's real money, although, that's less than we've spent on Iraq and Afghanistan wars. It's less than the tax cuts for the wealthiest few Americans that Congress passed during the previous administration—wars and tax cuts that were not paid for and ballooned our deficits to record levels and didn't help America's working families. We won't make that mistake again. We will not pay for health insurance reform by adding to our deficits. I will not sign a bill that adds a dime to our deficits, either now or in the future.

What we will do is pay for it by eliminating hundreds of billions of dollars in fraud and waste and abuse, including billions of dollars in subsidies for insurance companies that pad their profits but aren't improving care. We'll also set up a commission of doctors and medical experts to encourage the adoption of commonsense, best practices that can further reduce costs and raise quality in the years ahead. That's how we'll pay for most of this plan, by using money that's already being spent in the health care system, but spent badly.

So don't pay attention to those scary stories about how Medicare benefits will be cut. That will never happen on my watch. We will protect Medicare, so it's a safety net for our seniors that they can count on today, tomorrow, forever. Not a dollar from the Medicare Trust Fund will be used to pay for this plan, not a single dollar.

These are the reforms I'm proposing. These are the reforms labor has been championing. These are the reforms the American people need. These are the reforms I intend to sign into law: quality, affordable health insurance; a world-class education; good jobs that pay well and can't be outsourced; a strong labor movement. That's how we'll lift up hard-working families. That's how we'll grow our middle class. That's how we'll put opportunity within reach in the United States of America.

Now, the battle for opportunity has always been fought in places like Pittsburgh, places like Pennsylvania. It was here that Pittsburgh rail workers rose up in a great strike. It was here that Homestead steelworkers took on Pinkerton guards at Carnegie mills. It was here that something happened in a town called Aliquippa.

It was a tough place for workers in the 1930s, "a benevolent dictatorship," said the local steel boss. Labor had no rights. The foreman's whim ruled the day. And the company hired workers from different lands and different races—the better to keep them divided, it was thought at the time.

But despite threats and harassment, despite seeing organizers fired and driven out of town, these steelworkers came together—Serb and Croat, Italian and Pole, and Irish and Greek, and kin of Alabama slaves and son of Pennsylvania coal miners—and they took their case all the way to the Supreme Court, securing the right to organize up and down the Ohio River Valley and all across America.

And I know that if America can come together like Aliquippa and rise above barriers of faith and race and region and party, then we will not only make life better for steelworkers like Steve in Indiana, not only make life better for members of the AFL–CIO, but will make possible the dreams of middle class families and make real the promise of the United States of America for everybody. That's what we're fighting for. That's what this White House is committed to. That's what the AFL–CIO is committed to. And arm in arm, we are going to get this done.

I got a question for you: Are you fired up?

Audience members. Yes!

The President. Are you ready to go?

Audience members. Yes!

The President. Are you fired up?

Audience members. Yes!

The President. Are you ready to go?

Audience members. Yes!

The President. Let's go get this done. Thank you, everybody. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:23 p.m. at David L. Lawrence Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Richard L. Trumka, secretary-treasurer, and Arlene Holt Baker, executive vice president, AFL-CIO; Elizabeth Bunn, secretary-treasurer, United Auto Workers; and Treasury Department Senior Adviser for Auto Issues Ron Bloom, in his capacity as Senior Counselor to the President for Manufacturing Policy.

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Names: Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Bloom, Ron; Bunn, Elizabeth; Holt Baker, Arlene; Moore, Kennedy; Skvara, Steve; Solis, Hilda L.; Specter, Arlen; Sweeney, John J.; Sweeney, Maureen; Trumka, Richard L.

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